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SUBJECT: FIGHT WITH CHRISTIAN GROUPS FURTHER WEAKENS KERALA
LEFTISTS

REF: 07 CHENNAI 602

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Leftist political leaders have been engaged in a months-long war of words with Syrian Christian leaders in the South Indian state Kerala. The Syrian Christians' anger at government proposals that would reduce their church's autonomy to manage its schools has pushed them into direct conflict with the ruling leftist coalition. Although the state's diverse Christian community is unlikely to uniformly accept the bishops' exhortations on politics, the confrontation has certainly contributed the ruling leftist coalition's mounting political woes. END SUMMARY.

CHRISTIANS AN INFLUENTIAL AND DIVERSE MINORITY

¶2. (SBU) Kerala has one of the highest proportions of Christians in India: nineteen percent of Kerala's thirty-two million people are Christian. Kerala has three major Christian communities, each with its roots in a different era of religious conversion. The oldest traces its origins to first century AD churches established by St. Thomas, the second to conversions by Portuguese missionaries during the sixteenth century, and the third to conversions during the British period. The oldest of the three groups, known as "Syrian Christians," wields much economic and political clout and runs a large number of educational institutions in the state. The later groups are largely made up for former members of the backward castes and thus benefit from the state's affirmative action policies. Together, Christians constitute a major swing vote in Kerala, a state known for its tendency to alternate between Congress and Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led coalitions.

COMMUNISTS THREATEN CONTROL OVER CHURCH SCHOOLS

¶3. (SBU) The Syrian Christians, who control a large number of schools, feel most threatened by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government, which is led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)). Since the LDF came to power in 2006, the government and the Syrian Christians have clashed over the issue of schools. First, the government sought to bring private professional colleges under state control. This evoked sharp criticism from the Church, which in turn prompted the CPI(M)'s student wing to stage violent protests at some of the colleges. The conflict subsided only after a court struck down the contentious provisions of the government's legislation.

¶4. (SBU) After being forced to abandon its attempt to take control of the colleges, the LDF government continued to antagonize religious schools. Newspapers reported that the government planned to assert the right to appoint teachers in "aided schools" -- private schools (including many church schools) where the government pays teachers' salaries. In justifying the move, government officials pointed out that these appointments are the source of considerable corruption with school management requiring prospective

teachers to pay bribes to secure positions. The private schools responded by saying the government move was simply a punitive measure meant to curtail churches' long held privilege to appoint teachers. Tempers flared with a Syrian Christian Cardinal reportedly saying the Church would not allow the "drunkards and atheists" appointed by the leftist government to teach in its schools. The State Education Minister retorted by noting that even liquor shops are subject to more regulation than religious schools.

15. (SBU) Kerala's aggressive media fueled the fight by playing up a rather picayune dispute between the CPI(M) and the Church. When the Syrian Christian Bishop of Thiruvambady claimed that a leftist leader had received "the sacrament" on his deathbed, communist luminaries took umbrage. CPI(M) State Secretary Pinarayi Vijayan publicly denounced the bishop, calling him a "wretched creature." Christians, in turn, took to the streets in Thiruvambady. More than 30,000 people turned out in protest, closing down schools and hospitals throughout the district.

CHRISTIANS REACH OUT TO OTHER
DENOMINATIONS, HINDUS FOR SUPPORT

16. (SBU) The Syrian Christians have allied with a major Hindu organization, the Nair Service Society, in the battle to retain autonomy over religious schools. Other Christian denominations have also expressed solidarity with the Syrian Christians because all of them own schools and colleges, and thus have a common interest in maintaining their control.

17. (SBU) A Syrian Christian journalist told post that the Church has succeeded in moving the dispute into the media. But, he said, the Church does not have the clout it had fifty years ago when it could force a change in government. The journalist said poorer sections of the Christian community are not swayed by the Bishops' pastoral

letters urging believers to stay away from the Communist parties. He also pointed out that Hindu-Christian solidarity exists at the leadership level, but does not percolate down to the rank and file. Nonetheless, with Kerala's political scene carefully balanced between two equally powerful coalitions -- one led by the CPI(M) and the other by the Congress party -- a minor swing in popular sentiment (such as the one generated in the fight over control of Christian schools) could have an impact in elections. Despite the Syrian Christian Church's diminished power, the journalist believes that the CPI(M) is vulnerable, having lost much of its popularity after sweeping the 2006 elections to the state assembly.

SPAT WITH CHURCH PART OF CPI(M) INFIGHTING;
ANOTHER SIGN OF LEFT'S POTENTIAL ELECTORAL CHALLENGES

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The fight between the CPI(M) and the Christians is actually driven by the party's ongoing internal elections in which there is a bitter power struggle between Chief Minister Achuthanandan and State Secretary Vijayan (reftel). Vijayan, as State Secretary, controls the party machinery; Achuthanandan, as Chief Minister, controls the government. Vijayan, a reform-minded CPI(M) leader who is seen by many in the party as ideologically suspect, is clearly beating up on the establishment church in an attempt to shore up his reputation as a "true communist." But by picking a fight with the still influential Syrian Christians, and by extension other Christian denominations as well as Hindus, Vijayan has further weakened an already troubled Kerala CPI(M)'s prospects in the event of early parliamentary elections. END COMMENT.

HOPPER